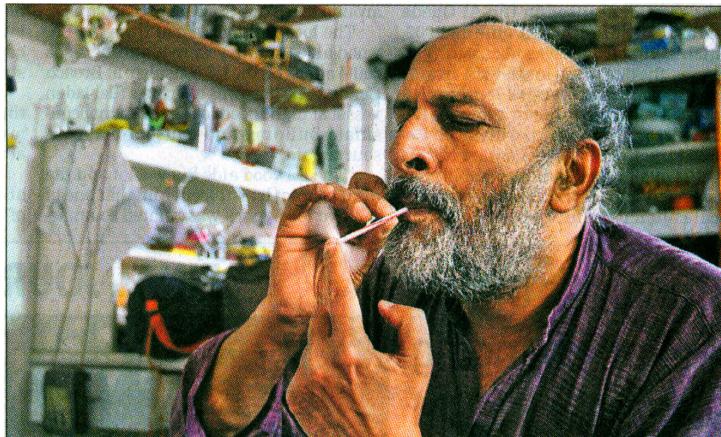


'She gave me a sense of self-esteem'

Arvind Gupta, ace science populariser at IUCAA's Science Centre for Children in Pune, talks about his favourite teacher



TEACHING THROUGH EXPERIMENTS: Arvind Gupta

My parents never went to school but my mother ensured that her children went to the best school. The best school in Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh, was the St Maria Goretti convent school. This co-educational school was run by nuns. There were nine girls and three boys in my class. Three students opted for advanced mathematics for the Senior Cambridge exam and I was one of them.

Mrs. Frey was my mathematics teacher. I still do not know her first name. Mrs. Frey and us students would sit across a small table. On the very first day, she told us, "Look children, I do not know much Maths myself, so you will have to figure things out for yourself and learn from one another!" She knew that I was good at Maths, but weak in English. Hence, she talked to me for hours in English and encouraged me to read more. She repeatedly told me, "Arvind, I have faith in you!" This boosted my confidence and I passed my English examinations with distinction!

I still remember Mrs. Frey as my best teacher. She had the courage to be honest. She nudged us gently to relate things to real life. Once, we were doing 'hexaminoes'. Given six squares, how many original networks can one make? Copycats, rotations and reflections were discounted. After a while, we figured out that there could be just 35 and no more. Then she asked us which networks could be folded to make a cube. For this, we actually drew, cut and folded them. It was fun and great learning. While our chemistry teacher made us 'mug up' things, this splendid maths teacher made us do 'experiments'.

Mrs. Frey's older son, David, studied in Sherwood School, Nainital. David and I were of the same age. A few days before the final Senior Cambridge examinations, Mrs. Frey came to our home with David. To reach our house was not easy. One had to cut across numerous lanes and by-lanes. How Mrs. Frey actually located our home remains a mystery. My elder sister was Mrs. Frey's old student. We were both overjoyed to see her and welcomed her. Mrs. Frey announced, "David is having some problems with mathematics and I thought I should take him to my two brightest students!" As can be imagined, my sister and I were on top of the world.

Along with my mother, Mrs. Frey, is the one person who gave me a sense of self-esteem. It is this sense of self-worth which made me choose a career far removed from my IIT degree. For the past 30 years, I have tried to make science a fun-filled experience for the children of my country. I have loved every minute of it and for this I must thank Mrs. Frey for giving me faith in my own abilities.

(As told to Rahul Chandawarkar)